

IS THERE A GOD?

BY "ICONOCLAST."

MANY persons are aware that I avow myself an Atheist, and have heard me give reasons for my Atheism; and, at their request, I place some of those reasons before you. I do not say, "There is no God," and the scarcely polite rejoinder of those who quote the Psalmist cannot, therefore, be applied with justice towards myself. I have never yet heard living man give me a clear, coherent definition of the word "God," and I have never read any definition from either dead or living man expressing a definite and comprehensible idea of Deity. In fact, it has always appeared to me that men use that word rather to hide their ignorance than to express their knowledge.* Climatic conditions often, and diverse physical structure always, govern and modify the meaning conveyed by the word. By "God" one nation or sect expresses love—another, vengeance—another, good—another, wisdom—another, fire—another, water—another, air—another, earth—and some even confound their notion of Deity with that of devil. Elihu Palmer well observes: "The Christian world worships three infinite Gods, and one omniscient devil." "I do not deny God," because that word conveys to me no idea, and I cannot deny that which presents to me no distinct affirmation, and of which the would-be affirmer has no conception. I cannot war with a nonentity. If, however, God is affirmed to represent an existence which is distinct from the existence of which I am a mode, and which it is alleged is not the *noumenon*, of which the word "I" represents only a speciality of *phenomena*, then I deny "God," and affirm that it is impossible "God" can be. That is, I affirm that there is one existence, and deny that there can be more than one. Atheists mostly are content to say to their opponents, your "proofs" are no proofs, your "evidences" are failures, you do not, and cannot prove the existence of Deity. This ground may be safe, but the conduct of its occupier is not daring. The swordsman who always guarded and parried, but never cut or thrust, might himself escape unwounded, but he would never gain a glorious victory over his opponent.

It is well to show that your antagonist is weak, but it is better to prove that you are strong.

In a paper as limited as the present, it is necessary to be brief both in answer to opponents, and in the statement of my own opinions. This is rather intended as the opening speech of a debate, than as a complete essay on the existence of Deity.

* In Sir William Hamilton's Essay on Cousin, I find a note quoting M. Plessio on Kant, in which the word *God* stands as the equivalent for a phase of the unknowable.

There are two modes in which Theists endeavour to prove the existence of God—1st. the *à priori*; 2nd, the *à posteriori*. Of the former, Pearson, in his "Prize Essay on Infidelity," says: "The *à priori* mode of reasoning is the exclusive idol of many of the German logicians.....But in their hands this kind of reasoning has completely failed. It conducts the mind to no firm resting place; it bewilders instead of elucidating our notions of God, of man, and the universe. It gives us no divine personal existence, and leaves us floating in a region of mere vague abstractions. Such reasonings are either altogether vain, or are not really what they profess to be. In our country the name of Dr. Clarke is chiefly associated with the *à priori* argument..... Clarke himself found it necessary to stoop to the argument *à posteriori*, and thereby acknowledged the fallacy of attempting to reason exclusively *à priori*.....The fate of Dr. Clarke's pretended demonstration, and the result, in so far as theology is concerned, of the transcendental reasoning of the continental philosophers, show the futility of attempting to rise up to the height of the great argument of the existence of God by the *à priori* method alone."

Of the latter, William Gillespie, in his "Treatise on the Necessary Existence of Deity," says that it "can never make it appear that infinity belongs in any way to God." It "can only entitle us to infer the existence of a being of finite extension, for, by what rule in philosophy can we deduce from the existence of an object finite in extent (and nothing is plainer than that the marks of design which we can discover must be finite in their extent) the existence of a cause of infinity of extension? What, then, becomes of the omnipresence of the Deity, according to those who are content to rest satisfied from the reasoning of experience?.....It will be vain to talk of the Deity being present by his energy, although he may not be present by his substance, to the whole universe. For, 'tis natural to ask not so much how it is proved that God is virtually present, though not substantially present, in every part of nature; as what can be meant by being everywhere present by mere energy?" This "reasoning can no more make out that the Deity is omnipresent by his virtue, than that he is omnipresent as to his substance.....And, from the inaptitude of the reasoning under consideration to show that immensity, or omnipresence, belongs to God, it will be found to follow, directly and immediately, that his wisdom and power cannot be shown to be more than finite, and that he can never be proved to be a free agent..... Omnipresence (let it be only by energy) is absolutely necessary in a being of infinity of wisdom. And, therefore, 'the design argument' is unable to evince that the Deity is in possession of this attribute. It likewise plainly follows, from the inaptitude of this argument to show that God is omnipresent, that thereby we cannot prove infinity of power to belong to him. For, if the argument cannot make out that the being it discovers is everywhere present, how can it ever make out that He is everywhere powerful? By careful reflection, too, we may perceive that omnipotence of another kind than power, which can exert itself in all places, requires the existence of immensity." The design argument "can never evince that God is a free agent.....If we cannot prove the immensity or omnipresence of the Deity, we can for that reason never show that He is omniscient, that He is

omnipotent, that He is entirely free.....If the Deity cannot be proved to be of infinity in any given respect, it would be nothing less than absurd to suppose that He could be proved to be of infinity in any other respect." It "can do no more than prove that at the commencement of the phenomena which pass under its review, there existed a cause exactly sufficient to make the effects begin to be. That this cause existed from eternity the reasonings from experience by no means show. Nay, for aught they make known, the designer himself may not have existed long before those marks of design which betoken his workmanship." This reasoning "cannot prove that the God whom it reveals has existed from all eternity, therefore for anything it intimates, God may at some time cease to be, and the workmanship may have an existence when the workman hath fallen into annihilation. Such reasonings can never assure us of the unity of the Deity." "Whether there be one God or not, the argument from experience doth by no means make clear. It discovers marks of design in the phenomena of nature, and infers the existence of at least one intelligent substance sufficient to produce them. Further, however, it advances not our knowledge. Whether the cause of the phenomena be one God or many Gods, it pretends not to determine past all doubt....But did this designer create the matter in which the design appeared? Of this the argument cannot convince us, for it does no more than infer a designing cause from certain appearances, in the same way we would infer from finding some well-contrived machine in a desert that a human being had left it there.....Now, because this reasoning cannot convince us of such a creation, it cannot convince us there is not a plurality of deities, or of the causes of things.....If we cannot prove the eternity of God, it is not possible we can prove the unity of God. To say that, for anything we know to the contrary, He may have existed from all eternity, being much the same as saying that, for anything we know to the contrary, there may be another God or many Gods beside."

Dr. Lyman Beecher issued some few years since a series of lectures on Atheism. His statements of Atheistic opinions are monstrous perversions, and his answers are directed against the straw man built together by himself. The doctrine of "almighty chance" is certainly one which Dr. Beecher never heard an educated Atheist teach. In his first lecture the misrepresentation of Freethought objects is so obvious, that it can only be effectual with those who have never freed themselves from the trammels of faith bound upon them in their infancy, and strengthened with their growth. The Rev. J. Orr, in his "Treatise on Theism," says, "All inquiry about chance is, however, impertinent in the present day. The idea is an infantine one, possible of entertainment only in the initial state of human knowledge. Chance is *not* the position relied upon by modern Atheism. And when, therefore, the Theist expends the artillery of his argument upon this broken down and obsolete notion, he is intermeddling with the dead, and after accomplishing the destruction of the venerable fallacy, the modern Atheist will likely ask him to come down to the nineteenth century and meet him there."

The only shadow of argument in Dr. Beecher's book is founded on the assumption—1st. That there is an existence called matter. 2nd. That

there are certain effects perceivable which cannot result from matter. 3rd. That, therefore, there is a God the cause for these effects. We, however should like to see the Materialists who accept Dr. Beecher's limitation of matter. It is a word I do not use myself.

On pages 11 to 13 of the "Trial of Theism," Mr. Holyoake repeats his well-known refutation of Paley's imperfect argument; and for want of space we refer the reader to the work itself as an able statement of the deficiencies of the Theist's position, and as a clear demonstration of the Theist's weakness when he endeavours to prove his creed. In two essays on "The Existence of Evil," and on "The Religious Sentiment," by G. T., the reader will find great help from the boldness and subtlety of thought evinced by the writer. On the question of evil, Coleridge, in his "Aids to Reflection," says:—"1st. That evil must have had a beginning, since otherwise it must either be God or a co-eternal and co-equal rival with God. 2nd. That it could not originate in God; for if so, it would at once be evil and not evil, or God would be at once God—that is, infinite goodness, and not God." If God be infinite goodness, can evil exist at all? It is necessary above all that we should understand the meaning of each word we use. Some men talk as if their words were intended rather to conceal than to express their ideas. So far as this essay is concerned, I will endeavour to avoid this difficulty by explicitly defining each special word I use. Dugald Stewart, indeed, says, "That there are many words used in philosophical discourse which do not admit of logical definition is abundantly manifest. This is the case with all those words that signify things uncompoundd, and consequently unsusceptible of analysis—a proposition, one should think, almost self-evident; and yet it is surprising how very generally it has been overlooked by philosophers."

The advantages, however, accruing from frequent definitions are very great; at the least they serve to explain what was meant by the persons using the word, whereas sometimes two men confuse each other by using words to which each attaches an opposite or a dissimilar value.

Men will talk of "First Cause," and "Intelligent First Cause." Do they know what they mean? I confess I do not, and from the manner in which they use the words, the most charitable conclusion is that they use them because others have done so, and for no worse or better reason. They talk of the "Beauties of Creation," and "Works of the Great Creator." If by creation is meant the origin of existence, then each utterance of the phrase is an absurdity. "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," are words of no greater import to myself than would be "Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesa," to the Protestant Christian. H. G. Atkinson says, "I fully agree as to the necessity of defining terms. In my opinion there are too many terms signifying the same thing, and too many distinct conditions included under one term. For instance, force, virtue, power, principle, spirit, soul, &c., are used to signify the active character or quality of a body, and yet what distinct matters are included under the term virtue, spirit, soul, force."

The line of thought pursued in the following pages was originated by a perusal of the works of Benedict Spinoza, and while acknowledging the source from whence my argument is drawn, I beg most distinctly to assert my right to think unfettered by any conclusions to which the powerful

brain of Spinoza attained. He was but a man, and I strive to be one also. I accept him as one who has "gone before" in the tilsome path, but while borrowing the light of his investigations, I do not pledge myself to follow in all his steps. My definitions are as follow :—

1. By existence, or substance, I mean that which is in itself and is conceived *per se*—that is, the conception of which does not require the conception of anything else as antecedent to it. 2. By attribute, I understand that by which I cognise any mode of existence. 3. By mode, I understand each cognised condition or accident of existence. 4. By eternity, I mean indefinite duration. 5. By infinity, I mean indefinite extension. The axioms, so far as I shall give them, are in the precise language of Spinoza. "1. Everything which is, is in itself, or in some other thing. 2. That which cannot be conceived through another *per aliud*, must be conceived *per se*. 3. From a given determinate cause, the effect necessarily follows; and *vice versâ*, if no determinate cause be given, no effect can follow. 4. The knowledge of an effect depends on a knowledge of the cause, and includes it. 5. Things that have nothing in common with each other cannot be understood by means of each other—that is, the conception of one does not involve the conception of the other."

Propositions :—Existence is prior to its modes. This follows from definitions 1 and 3, because modes of existence are conceived relatively and in dependence on existence, which is absolutely precedent in such conception.

Existences having different attributes have nothing in common with each other. This is founded on definition 1.

Existences having nothing in common with each other, cannot be the cause of, or affect one another.

If they have nothing in common, they cannot be conceived by means of each other (per axiom 5), and they cannot be conceived as relating to each other, but must be conceived *per se* (per definition 1); and as (per axiom 4) the knowledge of an effect depends on the knowledge of the cause and includes it, it is impossible to conceive any existence as an effect so long as you cannot conceive it in relation to any other existence.

Having used the word "cause" several times, I should add that by "cause" in the absolute, I mean "existence." In its popular or relative sense, I use "cause" as an effect of some precedent causative influence, itself the cause of some consequent effect, as the means towards an end, in the accomplishment of which end it completes itself.

Archimedes is alleged to have said that, given a place whereon to rest his lever, he would move the world. Such a resting place is needed in our present argument—some fact on which our lever of reason may rest while we remove the world of error which now eclipses the sun of truth. What fact is there so certain, that I may base all my reasonings upon it? My existence is this primary fact; this, to me, indubitable certainty. I am. This logic can neither prove nor disprove. The very nature of proof is to make a proposition more clear to the mind than it was before, and no amount of evidence can increase my conviction of the certainty of my own existence. I do not affirm that I am existence, but I affirm that there is existence. This existence is either eternal, that is, unlimited in duration, that is, indefinite in duration; or else it had a beginning, that is, it has

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been created. If created, then such creation must be by some existence the same as itself, or by some existence differing from itself. But it cannot have been created by any existence the same as itself, because to imagine such, would be to conceive no more than a continuation of the same existence—there would be no discontinuity. But, says S. T. Coleridge, “where there is no discontinuity there can be no origination.” And it cannot have been created by any existence differing from itself, because things which have nothing in common with one another, cannot be the cause of, or affect, one another. Therefore this existence has not been created, that is, its duration is indefinite—that is, you cannot conceive a beginning—that is, it is eterna! This eternal existence is either infinite in extent, that is, is unlimited in extent, or it is finite, that is, limited. If limited, it must be limited by an existence the same as itself, or by an existence differing from itself. But the same arguments which applied to a limitation of duration, also apply to a limitation of extension. Therefore this existence is unlimited in extent; that is, is infinite and eternal—that is, there is only one existence. It is at this point that Atheism separates from Pantheism. Pantheism demonstrates one existence, but affirms for it infinite attributes. Atheism denies that attributes can be infinite. Attributes are but the distinguishing characteristics of modes, and how can that be infinite which is only the quality of finity? Men do not talk of infinite hardness or of infinite softness; yet they talk of infinite intelligence. Intelligence is not an existence, and the word is without value unless it strictly comprehend, and is included in, that which is intelligent. The hardness of the diamond, the brilliancy of the burnished steel, have no existence apart from the diamond or the steel. I, in fact, affirm that there is only one existence, and that all we take cognisance of is mode, or attribute of mode, of that existence.

The reader will notice that I have carefully abstained from using the words “matter” and “spirit.” My reason for so doing will be best understood after quoting the following from Dr. Priestley.

In the introduction to his disquisitions on matter and spirit, published in 1777, he says:—“It has generally been supposed that there are *two distinct kinds of substance* in human nature, and they have been distinguished by the terms *matter*, and *spirit*, or *mind*. The former of these has been said to be possessed of the property of *extension*—viz., of length, breadth, and thickness, and also of *solidity* or impenetrability, and consequently of a *vis inertiae*; but it is said to be naturally destitute of all other powers whatever. The latter has of late been defined to be a substance entirely destitute of all extension, or relation to space, so as to have no property in common with matter; and therefore to be properly *immaterial*, but to be possessed of the powers of perception, intelligence, and self-motion.

Matter is alleged to be that kind of substance of which our bodies are composed, whereas the principle of perception and thought belonging to us is said to reside in a spirit, or immaterial principle, intimately united to the body; while higher orders of intelligent beings, and especially the *Divine Being*, are said to be purely immaterial. It is maintained that neither matter nor spirit (meaning by the latter the subject of sense and thought)

correspond to the definitions above mentioned. For that matter is not that *inert* substance that it has been supposed to be; that powers of *attraction* or *repulsion* are necessary to its very being, and that no part of it appears to be *impenetrable* to other parts: I therefore define it to be a substance possessed of the property of extension, and powers of attraction or repulsion; and since it has never yet been asserted that the powers of *sensation* and *thought* are incompatible with these (*solidity* or *impenetrability*, and, consequently, a *vis inertiae*, only having been thought to be repugnant to them), I therefore maintain that we have no reason to suppose that there are in man two substances so distinct from each other as have been represented. It is likewise maintained that the notion of two substances that have no common property, and yet are capable of intimate connection and mutual action, is absurd."

I do not conceive *spirit* or *mind* as an existence. By the word *mind*, I simply express the totality of perception, observation, collection, and recollection of perceptions, reflection, and various other mental processes. Dugald Stewart, in his "Essay on Locke," says:—"We are conscious of sensation, thought, desire, volition, but we are not conscious of the existence of the mind itself."

It is urged that the idea of God is universal. This is not only not true, but I, in fact, deny that any coherent idea exists in connection with the word "God." George Combe, Volney, and the author of the "Système de la Nature," have well explained the origin of the various so-called God ideas. The chief object to which the emotions of any people are directed becomes their God. When these emotions were combined with vague traditions, and a priesthood became interested in handing down the traditions, and increasing the emotions, then the object becoming sacred was hallowed and adored, and uncertain opinions formed the basis of a creed. Any prominent phenomenon in the universe, which was not understood, was personified, as were also the various passions and phases of humanity. These, in time, were preached as religious truths, and in his "Relation between Science and Religion," George Combe points out that this diverted the people from inquiry into the natural causes of phenomena, which they accounted for as ordained by God, and when famine or pestilence occurred, instead of endeavouring to remove its cause or using preventive measures against a recurrence of the evil, they sought to discover why the supernatural power was offended and how it might be appeased, and ascribing to it their own passions and emotions, they offered prayers and sacrifices. These errors becoming institutions of the country, the people, prompted by their priests, regarded all those who endeavoured to overturn them by free and scientific thought and speech as blasphemers, and the Religion of each State has, therefore, always been opposed to the education of the people.

Archbishop Whately, in his "Elements of Rhetoric," Part 1, chap. ii., sect. 5, urges that "those who represent God or Gods as malevolent, capricious, or subject to human passions and vices, are invariably to be found amongst those who are brutal and uncivilised." We admit this, but ask is it not the fact that both the Old and New Testament teachings do represent God as malevolent, capricious, and subject to human passions

and vices: that is, are not these Bible views of God relics of a brutal and uncivilised people?

There is, of course, not room in a short essay like the present to say much upon the morality of Atheism, and it should therefore suffice to say, that truth and morality go hand in hand. That that is moral which tends to the permanent happiness of all. The continuance of falsehood never can result in permanent happiness; and therefore if Atheism be truthful, it must be moral, if it be against falsehood it must tend to human happiness.

Yet, if quoting great names will have effect, Lord Bacon, who is often quoted against Atheism, also says: "Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation, all of which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, *though religion were not*; but superstition dismounts all these, and erecteth an absolute monarchy in the mind of men; therefore Atheism never did perturb states, for it makes men wary of themselves as looking no further; and we see the times inclined to Atheism, as the times of Augustus Cæsar were civil times; but superstition has been the confusion of many states." George Combe says: "I have known men in whom the reasoning organs were amply developed and well cultivated, who assured me that they could not reach the conviction of the being of a God. I have known such men equal in point of integrity and practical benevolence to the most orthodox believers." In the West Riding of Yorkshire, amongst the men themselves, a wealthy employer, a few months since, bore favourable testimony to the conduct and intelligence of Atheistic working men. Nay, even the fanatical Dr. Lyman Beecher is obliged to concede that Atheism made converts amongst "females of education and refinement—females of respectable standing in society." Those who have read or heard divines quote Lord Bacon on Atheism should read the sixteenth letter in the correspondence on "Man's Nature and Development," between H. G. Atkinson and Harriet Martineau.

When I issued the first copy of this essay—of which, in eight months, eight thousand copies have been sold—I anticipated debate at the hands of the orthodox defenders of Christian theism. That anticipation has been disappointed, and, in issuing the present edition, I conclude it therefore with a formal challenge to the clergy of England—established and dissenting—to discuss with me the question:—"Is there a God?" I undertaking, in such debate, to affirm in detail, the views put forward briefly in these pages.

